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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the question of whether or not school improvement researchers are being realistic about social class-related constraints on the reform of low socioeconomic schools. It reviews findings from recent studies in the sociology of education and education policy that are highlighting the impact of social class on school and market processes. It also considers the school improvement literature's approach to the social class context of schooling, making the point that while school improvement writers have rarely given enough attention to social class or market contexts, some writers have been taking more account of these than others. Some recent school improvement writing signals growing concern with contexts but more research in this area is required. (Contains 110 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Reform Of Low Socioeconomic Schools: Are School Improvement Researchers Being Realistic?

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The Reform Of Low Socioeconomic Schools: Are School Improvement Researchers Being Realistic?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is concerned with the question of whether or not school improvement researchers are being realistic about social class-related constraints on the reform of low socioeconomic schools. It reviews findings from recent studies in the sociology of education and education policy which are highlighting the impact of social class on school and market processes. It also considers the school improvement literature's approach to the social class context of schooling. The paper argues that while school improvement writers have rarely given enough attention to social class or market contexts, some writers have been taking more account of these than others. Some recent school improvement writing signals growing concern with contexts but more research in this area is required.*

Introduction

Although schools with middle class student intakes present plenty of challenges for today's teachers and school leaders, there can be little doubt that those who work in low socioeconomic (SES) school settings face even greater problems. Often located in areas with high levels of unemployment and crime, as well as poor housing and health conditions, these schools are required to take on a huge caring role. Working class schools also have to cope with many students who bring low levels of prior achievement and who are frequently disaffected. Many of these schools are underfunded and inadequately staffed compared to schools in wealthier areas. They are rarely very popular with parents and do not attract much political support. In short, despite the evident humour and dignity of many staff and students, low socioeconomic (SES) schools face some extremely tough problems: they are at the sharp end of what Kozol (1991) has called *Savage Inequalities*.

This much is generally accepted by school improvement researchers[1] but the extent to which low SES schools can overcome their social class context to promote academic achievement is much more contentious. Some have been remarkably optimistic. Through the use of better management and teaching practices, low SES schools are often seen as capable of 'success against the odds' (National Commission on Education 1996). Others have predicted 'an end to failure in urban education' (Barber 1995), 'success for all' is on the cards (Slavin 1996), while some have even been committed to 'failure free' schooling (Reynolds and Stringfield 1996). However not all school improvement researchers make such bold claims. As recent book titles such as *No Quick*

[1] I am including here much work in associated fields such as school 'restructuring', school 'change', school 'leadership' and teacher 'quality.'

Fixes (Stoll and Myers 1998) suggest, it is becoming apparent to many researchers that 'failing' schools are proving much harder to 'turn around' than almost anyone expected a decade ago. A. Hargreaves (1997: ix) has cautioned that 'fundamental educational change is even more difficult, complex and controversial than the change literature has acknowledged so far' while Fullan (1997: 216) has also noted that there are 'many legitimate reasons to be discouraged'.

A University of London monograph *'Can School Improvement Overcome the Effects of Disadvantage?'* (Mortimore and Whitty 1997) provides an especially useful overview of research related to the difficulties of reforming low SES schools because it incorporates both school improvement and wider sociological and political perspectives. Mortimore and Whitty begin by citing Smith and Noble's (1995) observation that the impact of social disadvantage on educational achievement has become 'almost a taboo subject in policy debate in recent years' (Smith and Noble 1995: 133, cited in Mortimore and Whitty, 1997:1). They go on to suggest that 'society appears to be deeply confused about the relationship of disadvantage to patterns of achievement (p. 2) and that it 'needs to be clearer about what schools can and cannot do' (p. 12). They also argue:

> Two possible avenues forward are often seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. One builds on the work in school improvement ...The other is more fundamental and demands change not only to the nature of educational practice but also to the broader social and cultural contexts within which education takes place. We believe that an effective strategy for tackling disadvantage requires movement on both fronts. (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997:5).

Yet what Mortimore and Whitty's subsequent discussion of the school improvement 'front' perhaps best illustrates is that school improvement literature has done more to document cases of apparent 'success against the odds' than to explain them. It has provided little insight into the *relationship* between social structures and school practice, into how social class might actually impact on schooling processes including processes of school improvement. Nevertheless, to more accurately assess the feasibility of school improvement in low SES settings, we need to gain some understanding of the mechanisms through which social disadvantage creates limits and possibilities for schools and school reform. Otherwise, even where school improvement writers are drawing breath to reconsider school reform in low SES settings, their revised levels of confidence may still be misplaced. This is because the emerging improvement discourse, while emphasising instructional, organisational and policy/systems constraints, may still not put enough weight on the social limits of reform.

The potential costs of getting it wrong are considerable. To begin with, not giving enough weight to the impact of social class context on school improvement risks supporting the 'politics of blame' which are employed by neo-liberals and managerialists when they attempt to construct school 'failure'

as the responsibility of schools alone, with any reference to their wider social class context ruled out as an excuse for poor performance (Stoll and Myers 1998, Tomlinson 1997, Thrupp 1998a). Second, over-optimistic school improvement literature may encourage teachers and school leaders to uncritically accept these politics of blame (by fostering the belief that they mostly control and are therefore responsible for, student achievement[2]) and to also put energy into activities which will have relatively limited effect because of the impact of social class. Third, if school improvement literature does not give enough weight to the impact of social class, it may fail to either question the longstanding provision of schooling via a social hierarchy of schools or interrupt what many believe to be the further polarisation of school intakes by today's educational markets (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995, Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999). Fourth, by putting too much emphasis on the ability of low SES schools to be self-managing, self-evaluating and self-improving, improvement research may be used to underpin decentralising reforms which remove important forms of support for low SES schools. Finally, focussing excessively on the ability of schools to improve 'against the odds' may encourage governments to view educational reform as an adequate response to social inequality, rather than only one avenue for action as Mortimore and Whitty (1997) rightly point out.[3]

Thus the question of whether or not school improvement researchers are being realistic about social class related constraints on the reform of low SES schools is one of fundamental importance. This paper will approach the problem from two angles. I begin by reviewing a number of research findings from recent studies in the sociology of education and education policy which highlight constraints on low SES schools. One set of findings concerns the likely impact of 'school mix' - the social class composition of student intakes - on school processes and student achievement (Brown, Riddell, and Duffield 1996, Lauder and Hughes et al., 1999, Metz 1990, Thrupp, 1999). Another points to the social class-based nature of parental choice of schools which often leads to the decline of low SES schools in educational markets (Elmore and Fuller 1996, Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe 1995, Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, Marginson 1997). In combination, these class processes suggest the polarisation of school intakes and school processes and the development of low SES school environments which will be less able to promote academic achievement, even in a value-added sense. Thus the findings raise urgent questions about the viability of school improvement in low SES settings.

Against this background, the second part of the paper returns to the school improvement literature to see what it has been saying about the social class

[2] As Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998: 113) put it, 'lack of contextualisation can lead to a false optimism, exaggerating the extent to which local agency can challenge structural inequalities.'

[3] This point is also reinforced by Anyon (1995) and Kovach (1998). As Anyon has argued, 'The structural basis for failure in inner city schools - and the failure of educational reform there - is political, economic and cultural, and must be changed before meaningful school improvement projects can be successfully implemented. Thus, I think the only solution to educational resignation and failure in the inner city is the ultimate elimination of poverty and racial degradation' (Anyon 1995: 8).

context of schooling. I begin this section by summarising a review of school improvement work I undertook for a chapter in *'Schools Making a Difference: Let's Be Realistic!'* (Thrupp 1999). It is argued that while social class context has not been getting a lot of emphasis in school improvement literature, there has been important variation with respect to acknowledging its likely impact. I also briefly consider the massive *International Handbook of Educational Change* (Hargreaves *et al.* 1998). This new 'state of the art' collection may signal a turning point in school improvement work with respect to acknowledging and investigating the impact of social and market contexts, although how far this goes remains to be seen.

Recent Findings on School Mix, Parental Choice and the Polarisation of Schools in Educational Markets

School mix

Whether or not the social class intake of schools - school mix - has an impact on student achievement over and above the impact of individual class backgrounds has been an unresolved problem in quantitative school effectiveness research (SER) for more than three decades (Thrupp, 1995). Recent quantitative findings on school mix (generally called a compositional, contextual or peer effect in this literature) continue to contradict one another. While some researchers argue that school mix does have a significant influence on achievement (Lauder and Hughes et al 1999, McPherson and Willms 1987, Willms, 1992) others maintain that it does not (Harker and Nash 1996, Thomas and Mortimore, 1994). Mortimore *et al.* (1994) describe the effects of school mix on achievement as an 'unresolved issue' in school effectiveness research.

Nevertheless recent qualitative studies, including my own research in Wellington, New Zealand, are providing new kinds of support for the idea that school mix has an important impact. The impetus for the Wellington study was the concern that quantitative school effectiveness literature offered no clear picture of the nature or importance of the impact of school mix on student achievement (Thrupp, 1995). It employed a mostly ethnographic approach to explore the possible impact of school mix on various school processes including reference group processes, classroom instruction and school organisation and management in four high schools of varying SES composition. A nested and comparative research design was used, involving a year of intensive fieldwork across the four schools, and centred on the experiences of a small number of matched low SES students in each school. It drew on multiple data sources including over 260 hours of classroom observation and 60 semi-structured interviews with students and staff. This approach resulted in a particularly rich picture of the problems and possibilities faced by the matched students and their teachers and school leaders in each school (Thrupp 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999).

What the study found was that school mix appears to impact on school processes in numerous ways so as to cumulatively drag down the academic performance of schools in low SES settings and boost it in middle class settings. By virtue of their higher SES student intakes, the matched students attending the middle class schools in the study ('Victoria', 'Wakefield' and 'Plimmer' Colleges) accrued numerous advantages over those in the lowest SES school ('Tui College'). To begin with, the matched students' school friends and classmates had a wider range of curriculum-relevant experiences/social capital, higher levels of prior attainment, more previous experience of school success, more regular school attendance, higher academic goals, higher SES occupational aspirations/expectations and less involvement in 'alienated' student subcultures than those at Tui College. When it came to classroom instruction, the matched students in the middle class schools were taught in teaching classes which were generally more compliant and more able to cope with difficult work. They used more demanding texts and other teaching resources and their teachers were more qualified and more motivated. The middle class schools were also able to support more academic school programmes and a wider range of extracurricular activities. Finally it was easier to organise and manage the middle class schools. Day to day routines were more efficient and more easily accomplished. They had less pressured guidance and discipline systems with higher levels of student compliance and fewer very difficult guidance/discipline cases. Their senior management teams had fewer student, staff, marketing and fundraising problems and had more time to devote to planning and monitoring performance. The middle class schools also had Boards of Trustees with more useful qualifications and business contacts.

These differences were only partly to do with disparities in material and staffing resources, factors often cited as a cause of inequalities between schools. A more powerful explanation revolves around the idea of school policies and practices of many kinds having to be negotiated with students on the basis of class-related levels of compliance, motivation and 'ability' which are in turn related to students' views of schooling and their likely occupational futures. The Wellington study also points to the importance of critical mass. In a predominantly middle class school, the struggles of working class families and students are marginalised and can have relatively little effect on school management, teaching and student reference group processes. As a school becomes more working class however, it can be predicted that the processes of the school will shift, despite resistance from middle class teachers and students, towards the culture of the increasingly sizeable working class group.

This in turn reflects the organic or inter-connected relationship between schools and middle class, rather than working class families (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Schools develop processes which reflect their SES mix. Solidly middle class schools have strongly supportive student cultures which allow them to teach an academic, exam-based curriculum and to organise and manage themselves relatively smoothly. Working class schools will, in general, be quite the opposite. Yet a deficit approach to working class culture is not intended here. Rather the Wellington study highlights the extent to which

school effectiveness in an academic sense not only reflects the middle class bias of schooling in capitalist societies but also appears to rest upon the cultural resources and responses of students from middle class families.

There are clear parallels with process differences reported by other qualitative studies which, while investigating somewhat different questions, have also compared schools of differing social class. Of particular relevance is US research by Anyon (1981), Lareau (1989) and Metz (1990) as well as Connell *et al.'s* (1982) Australian study and the Scottish findings of Brown, Riddell, and Duffield (1996). For instance Brown and colleagues also examined four schools, but in this instance examined contrasting schools of high and low SES effectiveness selected using a quantitative dataset. They found that only two factors seemed to be common to their 'highly effective' schools - the history of the schools and their efforts to involve pupils in the running of the school. On the other hand there were some 'striking contrasts' between the schools related to SES. Brown *et al.* (1996) highlight three:

> - the impact of the schools' achievement profiles. Since high SES schools could take for granted the exam success of most students, they were able to give special attention to those with learning difficulties. In the low SES schools learning support was more thinly spread because there were many more students in need;
>
> - the impact of different levels of motivation across the schools. At the low SES schools much greater efforts were needed to improve teacher morale, to encourage students to learn and to raise the level of parental involvement;
>
> - the differential impact of marketing on the schools. Marketing was a source of anxiety at the less popular low SES schools who could not advertise their emphasis on supporting low achievers in the prevailing national 'culture of achievement'. Again this was not an issue at the high SES schools where much higher exam results were the norm even though one of these schools was judged not to be effective. (Brown et al. 1996: 114-115)

The idea that school mix may powerfully influence school processes has important implications for the reform of low SES schools. First it suggests that SER researchers may not have been able to 'control' for social class as well as they have thought, so that many school processes considered to contribute to student achievement may be less independent of school mix than typically allowed. It therefore raises questions about the 'value added' by schools because it suggests that much of the so-called 'school effect' which has been found by SER studies may not reflect a school's effectiveness at all, but continue to be indirectly related to student body characteristics by way of school processes which are influenced by school mix. Second, it suggests that many effectiveness factors will be hard to replicate because while they may be *school-based*, they may nevertheless not be *school-caused*. They will relate to students' class backgrounds and therefore be difficult to modify. Third, the idea of a school

mix effect also challenges the notion that the 'ethos', 'climate' or 'culture' of schools can be created mostly by their staff because it suggests that they also largely reflect school mix. It emphasises the importance of seeing schooling as a two-way process, rather than something which can imposed by teachers and principals on their pupils.

Overall the idea of a school mix effect implies that schools with differing SES intake compositions will not be able to carry out similarly effective school policies and practices, even with similar levels of resourcing and after taking account of individual student backgrounds. It highlights enduring structural constraints for teachers and school leaders in low SES schools which should lead us to be cautious about claims of success against the odds. As Gray, Reynolds, Fitz-Gibbon, and Jesson (1996: x) have commented about Brown *et al.*'s (1996) findings: 'If these conclusions hold in other settings, then they offer some additional purchase on why many school improvement efforts may have stumbled - they have failed to disengage causes from correlations.' The Deputy Principal at Tui College put the problem this way:

> You can't do everything, you can't, you can't . . . Our management structures are probably not as good as they should be but that probably reflects the pressure we are all constantly under. You do not get time, the school does not allow you time, to sit back and reflect. I cannot believe the people I'm meeting at [a middle class school]. I cannot believe the, not laid back, but just open, friendly, unflurried way the staff relate to each other. It is extraordinary. And [that school] is working quite efficiently. But people don't have that kind of gaunt, drawn, lunatic look about them that you constantly see around here.

Parental choice

A second class-related difficulty faced by low SES schools is highlighted by recent studies which have investigated the process of school choice in educational markets: the problem that low SES schools are widely considered inferior to high SES schools. (Echols and Willms 1995, Fowler 1993, Gewirtz *et al.* 1995, Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999, Wells 1996, see also Gordon 1997, Hirsch 1997, Whitty, Power and Halpin 1998). As Hirsch (1997) points out, most studies indicate that 'a significant influence in choosing a school is who else chooses it'. Although choice studies also illustrate that there is nothing simple about choice and school mix, it does seem that intake composition is a key consideration of most parents, although this may often be indirectly expressed through references to school 'safety', 'standards', 'quality' and 'feeling'.

Importantly, this is not just the case for middle class families either. As part of New Zealand's Smithfield Project on educational markets we asked over 500 parents which secondary school they had chosen for their child for the following year (Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999). We found that initially, irrespective of SES, most parents said that they would prefer their child to attend (named) high SES schools. Yet in the same breath, many working class parents discounted the possibility that their child could attend these schools.

Over time the aspirations of other low SES families became progressively 'cooled out' as they came up against the difficulties of getting their children into the high SES schools. Although 68 per cent of low SES parents initially identified a high SES school as their ideal choice, in practice only 18 per cent enrolled in these schools. (Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999). It would seem that when families - including working class families - send their children to low SES schools this is less often because they don't regard high SES schools as better schools but because they are unwilling or unable to send their children to those schools for a variety of class-related reasons (Reay and Ball 1997, Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999).

A second indication of the greater popularity of high SES schools is that they tend to be thoroughly oversubscribed, while low SES schools struggle to maintain rolls (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995, Lauder and Hughes *et al.* 1999). Although the decline of low SES schools has sometimes been seen primarily as an issue of 'white flight' (Corbett 1994), the Smithfield findings have suggested that middle class Maori and Pacific Islands parents are also avoiding low SES schools where they can (Waslander and Thrupp 1995).

All of this indicates that many parents, regardless of class or ethnic group, believe that their children will be advantaged by attending high SES schools, even if their children do not attend such schools themselves. (Having said this, it also seems that once choices have been made, necessity often becomes a virtue). Central to our understanding of this preference for high SES schooling is the critical importance of high SES education as a means of both social closure and social mobility. By keeping out the children of the working class and ethnic minorities, high SES schools serve parents seeking relative advantage (Ball 1997). Put another way, high SES schooling needs to be seen as a *positional good*. Marginson (1997: 38) defines positional goods in education as 'places in education which provide students with relative advantage in the competition for jobs, income, social standing and prestige.' They are hierarchical, scarce in absolute terms and have a zero sum character:

> With a fixed number of positional goods at each level of advantage one person gains position only at another's expense. 'Positional competition in the language of game theory, is a zero sum game: what winners win, losers lose'. (Marginson 1997: 40 citing Hirsch 1976: 52)

The fact that high SES schools may offer positional advantage helps to explain why these schools are nearly always more popular than low SES schools which have little positional value.

The polarisation of school intakes, school processes and student achievement

Given the class-based nature of school choice, it is not surprising that policies designed to encourage choice such as 'open enrolment' or dezoning have the effect of intensifying SES segregation between schools. Since in the 'lived market' working class families are often not able or willing to exercise choice in

the ways theorised by neo-liberals, working class students are most likely to be left behind in 'sink' schools with increasingly poor intakes as higher SES families choose more popular schools for positional advantage. There is now much evidence to support this polarisation thesis. As Whitty *et al.* conclude:

> there is a growing body of empirical evidence that . . . the emphasis on parental choice and school autonomy is . . . increasing the differences between popular and less popular schools on a linear scale . . . (Whitty *et al.* 1998: 42)

Polarisation also appears to be a continuing, rather than one-off process. The Smithfield Project points to a domino effect, with students moving from the lowest SES schools to higher SES schools, followed by the highest SES students in these schools then moving on to even higher SES schools and so on (Lauder and Hughes *et al.* forthcoming). At the same time there is little evidence of the pre-existing social hierarchy of schools reducing through the promised diversity of types of school provision (Glatter *et al.* 1997), an argument which in any case ignores the positional value of traditional, high SES education.

Linking this work on markets to the work noted earlier on school mix, leads to the view that the polarisation of school intakes will heighten disparities in school processes and achievement outcomes. In today's 'sink' schools and perhaps in others if polarisation continues over time, the quality of school processes and academic achievement is likely to deteriorate as a result of a low SES school mix. Conversely, schools which are able to attract higher SES students will gain further advantages for themselves and their students. Gewirtz *et al.* argue that:

> Across schools we appear to be seeing an intensification of status hierarchies, provisional differentiation and segregation within the state system. Working class children and particularly children with SEN [special educational needs], are likely to be increasingly 'ghettoized' in underresourced and understaffed low status schools. The effects of school 'context' on pupil achievement, together with the underresourcing and understaffing of such schools, are likely to significantly impair the learning achievements of the children attending them . . . ethnic-minority children . . . are likely also to be disproportionately represented in the underresourced and understaffed schools. (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995: 188)

In the USA Elmore and Fuller also suggest that:

> it seems plausible to expect that, other things being equal, increasing parental choice will accelerate both the social stratification of schools and the gap in student performance between schools enrolling high concentrations of poor and working class students versus those with predominantly white, middle class students (Elmore and Fuller 1996: 191).

The School Improvement Literature and Social Class

Recent sociological and policy research therefore suggests powerful social class constraints on low SES schools, constraints which may be further intensified by the effects of educational markets. It is against this background that we now need to consider what the school improvement literature has been saying about the impact of social class on schools and school reform. This is especially important because research in the field of school improvement has often been criticised for being too technicist, for not adequately considering the social class (or ethnic, or market) context of schooling (eg. Angus 1993, Mac an Ghaill 1996, Hatcher 1996, Slee *et al.* 1998, Whitty *et al.* 1998). At the same time, many of the criticisms appear to have really been aimed at school effectiveness research, with school improvement research caught in the crossfire. For example Slee *et al.* (1998: 1) describe school improvement research as the 'operational branch' of SER. However this perspective ignores important differences in methodology and outlook between the two.[4] It reinforces the need for more detailed consideration of the school improvement approach to social class. Specifically: How have school improvement writers dealt with the social class dimensions of educational reform? Do they acknowledge 'Savage Inequalities'(Kozol 1991) between schools? If so, what have they seen as the implications of these? Does this issue enter into the models and concepts they have employed? Do they question whether school effectiveness studies can adequately 'control' for class? How have they perceived the effects of educational markets?

These are the key questions but addressing them poses a formidable challenge. Not only is the sheer quantity of improvement literature overwhelming, but there are important differences in the researched quality of this literature. Works derived from generic management models such as TQM are a particular problem. These often indicate little real willingness to engage with the actual difficulties of educational reform, social or otherwise. They epitomise the kind of school improvement texts Evans (1996:3) complains about which have an answer '[n]o matter how complex the problem, or how dismal the history of previous efforts to treat it. . . . Indeed, it often seems that the greater the dilemma, the greater their expectations for change'.

There are also important international variations in the focus of improvement research. For instance whereas 'school improvement' is in vogue in the UK, researchers in the USA usually refer to 'school restructuring'. This is a catch-all phrase for numerous reform aspirations and programmes but it carries the connotation of fundamental change - the view that 'simply improving parts of schools as we know them isn't enough' (Newmann and Wehlage 1995: 1). The USA has seen much greater corporate involvement in its reform efforts than has the UK, and ethnicity issues are also more to the fore in the USA.

[4] Although school improvement literature owes 'at least part of [its] intellectual heritage to school effects research' (Stringfield and Herman 1996: 163), and often cites school effectiveness findings, it tends to be much less quantitative and value-added in orientation than school effectiveness research, having a greater emphasis on school processes and relying more on case studies of school change.

Moreover there are significant political differences such as the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and the equity guarantees 'hardwired' into the American Constitution. As Boyd (1996: 81) has noted, these mean that 'Tory ministers pursue their objectives with an unhampered zeal that American congressmen can only envy'.

Given these considerations, my review for *Schools Making a Difference: Let's Be Realistic!* (Thrupp, 1999) focussed particularly on the work of six British and North American improvement writers who have achieved a high international profile - Michael Barber, Michael Fullan, John Gray, David Hopkins, Louise Stoll and Sam Stringfield. All are leading writers who have contributed books to the Cassell or Teachers College Press series on school development/reform or are on the editorial board of *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. They were chosen (as many others might have been) because their work illustrates a range of improvement perspectives and emphases with respect to the questions raised above. Focussing on a few individuals like this provided a useful sense of how various improvement discourses are being packaged. At the same time it was a small group so I also referred to the work of a number of other improvement writers in a concluding summary.

Variation within the literature

At one level, the review indicated that school improvement writers have varied widely in their sensitivity to possible social class and market constraints on low SES schools. Space does not the entire discussion to be repeated here but I will use books written by David Hopkins (Hopkins *et al.* 1994) and Louise Stoll (Stoll and Myers 1998) to give a sense of the range of perspectives.

School Improvement in an Era of Change (Hopkins *et al.* 1994).

This book illustrates a uncritical use of SER literature, a socially decontextualised approach to improvement issues and a rather diffident stance to the politics of reform. Hopkins provides a glowing account of SER, arguing that this literature is 'amongst the most robust that we have in our quest for educational reform,' that it is 'empirically the most valid in the whole area of educational change' and that 'It must therefore be taken seriously' (pp. 42-43). What follows, in Hopkins words, is 'an account which respects the conventional wisdom in the area' (p. 42). The same approach permeates the entire book including discussion of models of school change and school culture. It seems that Hopkins has little difficulty with any E&I work - he is happy to 'embrace multiple perspectives' on change. Even when he describes Caldwell and Spinks (1988) account of the 'self-managing school' as 'mechanistic' (which it is), Hopkins is quick to add that this is meant 'not in a pejorative but in a technical sense' (p. 74).

The book also employs only generalised models and concepts which rarely acknowledge any impact of SES on school processes. For instance although Hopkins argues (p.20) that the school improvement agenda is about changing

the culture of schools, his discussion concentrates on organisational notions of culture (after Schein 1985) rather than making any mention of social class culture and its impact on schools. Even Hopkins discussion of the importance of pupil and parent involvement in schools makes no mention of the impact of social class. When 'context' is discussed it is not social class context (or gender or ethnic context for that matter) but contexts such as the classroom (p. 118) or the 'size, shape and location' of schools (p. 151).

Hopkins does sometimes discuss the politics of reform but he seems to want a bob each way. He argues (p. 12) 'We have no evidence to suggest that accountability and increased competition, as strategies for improving the quality of education for all, actually work'. He also comments that 'We appear to be living in an Alice in Wonderland world of educational reform where the sole rationale for many policies is the public support for them by a small group of ideologically committed politicians'(p. 18). On the other hand he does not cite any of the numerous critics of recent British education policy and talks of working with schools 'within the framework of the national reform agenda' (p. 2). Mostly however, he seems to prefer to hedge his bets as to the outcomes of reform. We are told 'Whatever one thinks of our national reforms . . . The jury is still out' and 'Whatever one's position . . . there are lessons to be learned . . .' (pp. 5-6).

Hopkins appears to believe that schools can and should meet their own aspirations for their students in spite of the central policy agenda. He notes that policy does not travel far into schools and that this allows some autonomy for schools to engage in their own processes of improvement. However this approach is likely to underestimate the impact of both markets and accountability measures on schools. For instance, school development planning could be seen as a means of driving the policies of central agencies into schools (Taylor *et al.* 1997). Moreover, while Hopkins argues for a high degree of external support for schools, he also argues for a high degree of pressure on them in a way which may support the politics of blame (p. 83).

Similar problems appear to be common to all of Hopkins' school improvement work (at least until very recently as we shall see shortly). For instance, 'quality teachers' have only generalised attributes in his writing rather than attributes which may vary according to school mix (OECD 1994). Nor does his work on development planning (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1991, 1994) or his attempts to 'theorise' school improvement (Hopkins 1996) refer to social class context. As Ball (1993: 67) has noted, the discourse is 'technically-oriented, rational and apolitical', a case of 'management in the best of all possible schools'.

No Quick Fixes (Stoll and Myers 1998)

This work is more recent than *School Improvement in an Era of Change* but it also reflects an approach which gives more weight to the social limits of reform. It begins by making some thoughtful points about the limits of school

effectiveness, the importance of the social and political context of schooling and the need to avoid the politics of blame:

> School effectiveness research has demonstrated that . . . school can make a difference. In taking up these important research findings, some policy makers however, have construed this to mean that the school is responsible for the success or otherwise of its pupils. There is some truth in this but only to a limited extent. . . . It remains important, however to recognise that schools exist within a wider social context. . . . It seems clear that education policies related to improving schools in difficulty are most likely to succeed when taking the wider national and community interest into full account.
> (Stoll and Myers 1998: 10)

> If we look at other OECD countries, we find a distinct difference between those who emphasise *failure of pupils* (most countries) and the few, including England and Wales, who talk in terms of *school failure*. . . . When failure of the school is emphasised, the external contest is not considered. Indeed it is believed anyone who suggests the context may contribute to the school's problems is complacent and has low expectations of the pupils.
> (ibid: 9, Stoll and Myers emphasis)

> In our view, *every* child has a right to the best possible education. For this to occur, attention must be paid to the contextual causes of failure that lie outside the remit of the school as well as what occurs within it.
> (ibid: 16, Stoll and Myers emphasis)

This goes right to the heart of the matter and there is more - Stoll and Myers also express concerns about politicians' use of language such as 'zero tolerance' (they dispute Barber's (1998) claim that this is the same as 'success for all'), the misuse of value-added SER findings, the importance of the impact of social conditions on student achievement, the need for low SES schools to receive additional financial resources and management support and the negative impact of Ofsted inspections.

On the other hand, some of Stoll's other work in the same book suggests that the impact of the social class context of schooling is being given only limited weight. For instance, notions of school culture outlined in Stoll and Fink (1998) in the same collection make some links to school mix but remain very much within an organisational perspective. A 'sinking' school is described as follows:

> A sinking school is a failing school. It is not only ineffective: the staff, whether through apathy or ignorance, are not prepared or able to change. It is a school in which isolation, self-reliance, blame and loss of faith are dominating norms, and powerfully inhibit improvement. It will often, although not always, be in socially

> disadvantaged areas where parents are undemanding and teachers explain away failure by blaming inadequate parenting or unprepared children.
> (Stoll and Fink 1998: 192).

The view here appears to be that while 'sinking' schools are often in low SES settings, their 'ineffectiveness' is a matter of expectations rather than being more systematically related to the impact of school mix on school processes. (This is also a perspective which seems less than sympathetic to the problems of teachers in low SES settings). Similarly, a 'cruising school' is a school which is 'perceived as effective' but 'is usually located in a more affluent area where pupils achieve in spite of teaching quality' (Stoll and Fink 1998: 193). This is an attractive concept but one which fails to consider the multiple advantages that *any* school with a higher SES intake is likely to enjoy. Indeed, in terms of the school mix findings noted earlier, there is a sense in which all higher SES schools are likely to be 'cruising' because the processes which support academic work are so much easier to carry out there than in low SES settings.

The general picture

If the work of Hopkins and Stoll illustrates something of the spectrum of perspectives found by the 'Let's be Realistic!' review, the general picture painted was one of a literature which is unclear about either the social limits of reform or the likely impact of market policies in education. It suggests that Slee and Weiner's (1998: 5) complaint that school effectiveness research 'bleaches context from its analytic frame' can be applied to most school improvement research also. Some key problems are summarised below.

The uncritical use of SER findings

Some school improvement researchers are clearly very aware of, and open to, the possibility that quantitative SER studies may not be able to control adequately for social class (eg. Gray and Wilcox, 1995) while others indicate a healthy general skepticism towards school and teacher effectiveness findings (Elmore *et al.* 1996; Newmann and Associates 1996). Yet among most school improvement studies, questioning of SER findings is rare. Although few offer as much praise as Hopkins et al. (1994), most appear to accept even generalised SER findings at face value. For example Sammons' eleven school effectiveness factors (Sammons *et al.* 1995) are frequently cited in recent improvement work. School improvement writers who criticise SER tend to complain that it is too abstract or 'thin' to guide school improvement strategies rather than offer a more fundamental critiques of its claims, its methods or its politics. As many improvers have also been involved in SER, this may be considered unsurprising, but in fact the 'Let's be Realistic!' review suggested that those closest to the SER literature will often be the most aware of its contextual vulnerability with respect to social class.

The marginalisation of social class

Issues of social class are often marginalised in school improvement research which tends to concentrate on organisational or instructional concerns and only gives limited weight to the social dimensions of schooling. One way this occurs is by sampling. As in school effectiveness literature, research into schools undertaking improvement work has rarely included a diverse range of SES contexts. Most researchers follow Louis and Miles (1990) in concentrating on schools in low SES urban settings which are more often thought to need improvement. Huberman and Miles (1984), in contrast, surveyed twelve school improvement projects but only one was in a 'lower class' school.

Moreover even where school samples are apparently chosen for SES diversity, it is quite common for improvement studies to ignore the SES dimensions of schooling in subsequent discussion (eg. Chapman *et al.* 1996; Rudduck *et al.* 1996). Like SER, improvement literature tends to favour generalised rather than context specific discussion. This is seldom made explicit - it is more the case that the literature is vague about what sort of students, classrooms or schools are actually under discussion. The reader is therefore encouraged to take the view that schools' problems and solutions are essentially the same regardless of their social setting. For instance, Lieberman and Miller (1992) offer an interesting chapter on 'The social realities of teaching' but this makes no mention of social class context. Sometimes the focus is on individual psychological constructs rather than the impact of social structures. In Slavin's (1996) model of instruction and student achievement the student 'inputs' are 'aptitude' and 'motivation' rather than class, race or gender.

A good example of a socially decontextualised approach to school improvement is provided by the literature on teacher 'quality'. This tends to focus on features of good teaching which, in a similar way to recipes for effective schools, are generalisable across teachers in all SES settings. However this level of generalisation means that the research is hardly enlightening. Ramsay and Oliver (1995) point to quality teachers being intelligent, warm and compassionate, determined and having a sense of humour. All of this is well and good but rather self-evident especially when the school mix research discussed earlier indicates that it is the *differences* between what constitutes a successful teacher in high and low SES contexts which are likely to be more important.

The school leadership literature also tends to suffer from the problem of using an overgeneralised conception of schools rather than acknowledging SES differences. The problem can be seen for instance in the well-known work of Sergiovanni (1990, 1994, 1996). To give a rather obvious example where a decontextualised approach falls down, Sergiovanni (1990: 1) begins by stressing the importance of 'gambare' ('to persevere, to do one's best, to be persistent, to stick to one's purpose, to never give up until the job is done and done well'). In this spirit he cites a 'successful principal' in Los Angeles who, having installed some gardens in huge flowerpots around the school, replanted the pots fifteen times after they were vandalised. This is admirable of course but what is left

out of discussion here is that in most higher SES schools such perseverance in the face of adversity will never be called upon. Nor will this kind of essentially unproductive activity have to use up so much time.

One reason school improvement researchers may sometimes emphasise the most optimistic readings of their findings over more cautious ones which better reflect what is generally known about the pervasive impact of social class is that they often seem to be writing for an audience of potential funders where the rhetoric is one of success rather than a possible lack of it. We should not underestimate the pressure to talk up the outcomes of programmes in order to get a share of the private or state funding which is available for new initiatives. Timeframes can also become entirely unrealistic when politicians want results within electoral cycles. Yet when reforms aim at basic institutional changes or the eradication of deep social injustices, the appropriate period for evaluation may be a generation or more (Tyack and Cuban 1995). And even that may be being optimistic!

Decontextualised notions of school culture

Another important way that the impact of school mix is marginalised in improvement research is through notions of school culture which emphasis the organisational, management and instructional dimensions of schooling at the expense of the culture of students and the community. As a result we get school and teacher cultures which are 'stuck' and 'moving' (Rosenholtz 1989), 'individualist', 'collaborative', 'contrived' or 'balkanised' (Fullan and Hargreaves 1992; A. Hargreaves 1994), 'wandering', 'moving', 'stuck', and promenading' (Hopkins *et al.* 1994), 'formal', 'welfarist', 'hothouse', 'survivalist', 'traditional' and 'collegial' (Hargreaves 1995) and 'moving' 'cruising,' 'strolling', 'struggling' and 'sinking' (Stoll and Fink 1996, 1998). What we don't get however, (except in passing as we saw earlier in Stoll and Fink's work), are ways in which these various models of culture relate to middle class schools and working class schools, white schools and minority/indigenous schools and so on. Hargreaves (1995: 38) probably comes as close as any school improver to the problem when he says that 'whilst there is a general question of whether school effectiveness correlates with school culture, there is an equally important question of whether some cultures are more effective with certain kinds of teacher and certain kind of students'.

This is not to argue that the various attempts by school improvement writers to sum up different kinds of school and teacher culture might not be useful in some respects. However they fail to consider the impact of students and their cultures, either individually or collectively, on school organisation and management and instruction. As a result they do not acknowledge the reciprocal, negotiated nature of schooling and therefore tend to attribute school processes to staff rather than students. Hargreaves (1995) again recognises the problem when he points out that in recent times staff cultures have been highlighted rather than student cultures, as in earlier research. However he omits to point out that discussion of social class was also lost in this shift in emphasis. In response to Schein's argument, often cited by Hopkins, that

possibly 'the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture' (Schein 1985: 2), I would add the important rider that school leaders will have to respond to powerful student cultures also.

An uncritical view of educational markets

It is clear that some improvement writers are aware of the social limits of educational markets but here again perspectives vary markedly. Writers like Barber (1996, 1998) seem to have largely embraced the New Right agenda in education. Reynolds (1996) is another who has argued that 'on balance, devolution to schools will be a positive development'. He claims that education policy research is 'full of enthusiasm for the positive results for devolution of power to schools' (p. 133) but in doing so, has completely ignored the considerable body of literature which has not viewed decentralisation in such glowing terms (such as Bowe *et al.* 1992; Smyth 1993; Angus 1994). At the other end of the spectrum, researchers like Stoll (Stoll and Myers, 1998) express much more concern about the impact of markets. Others whose work reflects similar concerns include Elmore *et al.* (1996), Newmann and Associates (1996), Townsend (1997) and Myers and Goldstein (1998). Some of these are particularly worried about the co-option by policy makers of simplistic versions of their craft. Others are tapping into policy literatures which are more critical of reform.

Most frequently however, improvement writers are similarly located to Hopkins - not so much supporting neo-liberal and managerial policies in their writings but not taking enough account of them either. Indeed it is often difficult to determine what they actually think about the politics of reform. They frequently seem to accept market-based arguments about the value of reform, or aspects of them, at face value and they usually acknowledge equity concerns only in passing. Often these problems occur together. For instance Murphy (1991: 8) suggests on the one hand 'Perhaps for the first time in our history, economic forces and equity issues, or quality and equity values/goals, are being conjoined in the service of improved education for all students'. On the other hand, buried near the back of his book, he provides a discussion of the 'potential disequalising effects' of restructuring (p. 77).

A turning point in the literature?

Since completing the 'Let's Be Realistic!' review last year, I have also received a copy of the 'state of the art' *International Handbook of Educational Change* (Hargreaves et al., 1998). The perspectives on social class and educational markets taken by its quite diverse contributors vary considerably. Many don't mention social class at all while others do mention it but seem too optimistic about overcoming its impact (for instance, see Miles 1998: 62). However a number of contributions do include some useful discussion of social class and market-based constraints on school reform, at least in passing. Of particular interest is Hargreaves (1998) introduction to the section on contexts which points explicitly to the social and political contextual limitations of past school change/school improvement work. He writes of the need to 'revisit some of

the fundamental issues...and connect with sociological and political forms of inquiry that are attuned to the highly contested terrain [of schooling] (p.293).' He also notes that contextual analysis is generally lacking in school improvement work:

> Educational change theorists and administrators responsible for educational change...tend to have rather generalized, uncritical and underdeveloped conceptions of the context of change. Some change theorists and practitioners - especially in the field of school improvement - pay little or no attention to the context of improvement at all. (p. 290)
>
> Until very recently, within the change field, there has been little attention to how systematic social inequalities and power imbalances do not just surround the school and its community as part of the change context, but permeate the politics of change within the school itself. (p.291)

Hopkins (1998), in contrast to previous work, also develops some of the same themes in his introduction to the school improvement section of the collection. He notes 'a failure to embed school improvement initiatives within a contextual and diagnostic analysis' and goes on to indicates the importance of SES and market contexts, amongst others (Hopkins 1998: 1048).

The question then is what we should we make of this. Does it signal a welcome turning point in the literature? Perhaps, but other contributions in the same collection illustrate there is a considerable way to go. Two examples will suffice. First, Fink and Stoll's (1998: 304-5) discussion of the neglect of context cites the studies of Hallinger and Murphy (1986) and Teddlie et al. (1989) in relation to SES context. Reynolds (1998: 1281) discussion also cites Hallinger and Murphy (1986). Yet these two empirical studies are the same ones nearly always referenced in reviews by improvement writers which mention the impact of SES context. They may be useful but the repeated reference to just a couple of studies signals the difficulty that because the field hasn't been taking SES context seriously enough, there is precious little else to draw on.

Second, in their discussion of *reculturing* (the growing shift in emphasis by school improvement researchers away from organisational structures and formal planning to changing less tangible aspects of schooling) Fink and Stoll (1998) also note

> Reculturing goes beyond redefining the content and forms of *teacher* cultures. It must include *student* and *community* cultures as well. Students can be a conservative force when teachers attempt to change their practice because they find change from usual practice threatening. Similarly, as many studies reveal, communities are also resistant to educational change (p. 313, Fink and Stoll's emphasis).

There is welcome recognition here that student and community cultures do matter. On the other hand, there is little sense of trying to grapple with deep seated aspects of those cultures, such as those related to social class, which might not be 'recultured' even with effort. This kind of discussion points to a continuing assumption amongst school improvement researchers that school reform is possible 'against the odds' rather than an acknowledgement that it may not be, and a concern with better understanding the social limits of reform.

Conclusion

School improvement writers have rarely given much attention to the impact of social class or market contexts. At the same time, the 'Let's be Realistic!' review illustrates that some school improvement writers have been taking more account of social and market contexts than others. It suggests that while the contextual criticisms of critics of school improvement research have validity, they may also underestimate important variation within the literature. As well, some discussion in Hargreaves *et al.* 1998 suggests that school improvement writers might become more concerned with social class and market contexts.

If they do so, in the spirit of 'connect[ing] with sociological and political forms of inquiry' (Hargreaves 1998, p. 293), they could begin by taking more account of the school mix, school choice and school polarisation findings previously discussed. However it should also be acknowledged that all of these findings are contested. We have already seen for instance that a number of recent studies have not found evidence of a school mix effect, and debate about its existence continues.[5] Similarly, many studies have not stressed the importance of social class in school choice, although in most cases it is doubtful whether their methodologies could capture class-related strategies anyway.[6] Finally, at least one recent empirical study has suggested that the class polarisation of schools in educational markets has been overplayed (Gorard and Fitz 1998). Yet tensions in the research evidence in these areas are not likely to be easily or quickly resolved. This will be largely because of the very difficult causal issues involved and/or because national and local contexts also matter (Levin 1997). But in any case, such tensions surely point to the need for school improvement researchers to even more carefully examine the possible impact of the social and political context of schooling and school reform. It should also be stressed however that 'context' is an ill-defined term which may be prone to ideological capture in much the same way as 'choice' or 'quality'. For this reason we need to tie our discussion down to quite specific contexts, such as particular school social class or ethnic student intake compositions or specific positions occupied by schools in educational markets.

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[5] See for instance the exchange between Nash (1998) and (Thrupp, 1998c).

[6] For example a study of the school choices made by Detroit parents by Lee, Coninger and Smith (1996) concluded that the SES of the school and its academic qualities were less important than other factors. However their study used only a ranking of seven simple 'school quality statements' to come to this conclusion. In any case safety (the study's first ranked item) could well be seen by many parents as linked to school SES.

Lauder *et al.* (1998) may provide some useful leads. They propose a 'contextual' model of research which would be 'concerned with the link between capacities, potentials and limits within specific social contexts and within specific positions within an educational market' (p. 63). Research within the contextual model would ask four questions: 'what impact does a school's community and intake have on its performance; what impact does the educational market have on its performance; under what conditions could schools perform better, and how are we to develop contextual criteria for holding schools accountable' (ibid). As Lauder *et al.* go on to point out, this approach would have to be more open theoretically and methodologically than current literature in the area of school effectiveness and school improvement. For instance, rather than assuming that schools can mediate external factors, research within the contextual model would seek to document the conditions under which school processes may or may not be 'relatively autonomous' (i.e. able to be independent of various aspects of their social and political context).

The central value of this contextual model of research is that it would set aside the cliché that 'Schools can make a difference' and begin to consider more seriously why they might not. Given the potentially high costs of over-optimism, this would be a valuable direction for school improvement research over the next decade.

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